

# Australian university union elections point to seething discontent

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Results of recent National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) elections indicate deepening hostility among Australia university workers toward the sellouts being imposed by the trade union, on top of its decades of presiding over deteriorating conditions.

The elections took place amid an escalating assault on university staff and students, with class sizes soaring, permanent full-time jobs being eliminated, student fees and loan repayments rising, and courses and research being subordinated to the requirements of the corporate ruling class.

The Liberal-National government is stripping billions of dollars from the public universities, compounding the impact of the \$3 billion slashed by the previous Greens-backed Labor government. The NTEU, absolutely opposed to any unified struggle against this offensive, is instead frantically pushing through regressive enterprise agreements (EAs) with individual universities to assist each one to impose these cuts, at the expense of staff and students alike.

Already, according to the latest Education Department statistics, 46 percent of the academic workforce is in insecure forms of employment. This casualisation has been assisted by the NTEU's introduction of a new "Scholarly Teaching Fellow" classification in 2013. As of February 2018, almost 700 such teaching-intensive positions had been created, further undermining the research role of academics.

In a bid to head off the rising disaffection, and divert it back into the hands of the NTEU, pseudo-left candidates claimed they could "democratise" and "renew" the union. None of them opposed the pro-management record or perspective of the union, however.

More than a third—37 percent—of NTEU members who voted in last month's national leadership ballot supported such a candidate, University of Technology Sydney NTEU branch president Vince Caughley. Standing for the

post of assistant national secretary, he advocated "grassroots leadership renewal" to "make union strength a priority."

Caughley and his supporters did not contest the union presidency or national secretaryship, signalling their desire to join, not challenge, the NTEU leadership. In fact, they stressed their agreement with the NTEU's active promotion of the union movement's phony "change the rules" campaign, which advocates the return of yet another pro-business Labor government.

At the University of Sydney, a branch committee election saw pseudo-left supporters, who initially opposed last year's blatant NTEU enterprise agreement betrayal at the university, obtain five of the 12 contested positions.

The "USyd Union Action" ticket criticised the NTEU for settling last year's EA negotiations "before our core demands on job security, wages, and protecting the teaching-research nexus had been won." Nonetheless, Union Action vowed to work within the EA and did not stand against long-term branch president Kurt Iveson, who vehemently defended the EA as "the leading agreement in the higher education sector in Australia."

In a sign of a wider disaffection, branch committee posts remain vacant at numbers of the country's 39 public universities, as do three of the 11 seats on the union's national indigenous policy committee.

The union leadership has so far failed to provide members with a full report on the national election, despite outgoing president Jeannie Rea promising on August 31 to do so "as soon as it is finalised." It remains unclear how many members actually voted.

Without releasing any figures, Rea told the *Australian* on August 29 that West Australian NTEU state secretary Gabe Gooding won the ballot for national assistant secretary with 63 percent of the vote.

Gooding is part of a new leadership team of president Alison Barnes and national secretary Matthew McGowan,

who were elected unopposed with the backing of their outgoing predecessors, Rea and Grahame McCulloch.

McCulloch, who has run the NTEU or its predecessor union for 35 years, and Rea, president for eight years, are getting out after politically and industrially straitjacketing university workers for years through “enterprise bargaining,” and falsely promoting Labor and the Greens as defenders of public education.

Over four decades, the union has facilitated the transformation of the universities from institutions of higher learning and critical research, with full-time tenured academics. They are now corporatised entities, serving the needs of big business and the expanding military-intelligence apparatus, and predominantly staffed by severely exploited teachers and administrative staff on casual or short-term contracts. They depend on exorbitant fees charged to international students, generating \$31 billion in annual income for Australian capitalism.

The Barnes-McGowan-Gooding leadership represents a further pro-corporate shift. Barnes is spearheading an “interest-based bargaining” (IBB) program, based on the supposed common interests of employers and workers. In reality, IBB makes plain the mutual interest of the union bureaucrats and the managements in suppressing the opposition of workers to the destruction of jobs and basic conditions.

At Sydney’s Macquarie University, where Barnes has been NTEU branch president, she and other union officials are trying to push through an EA that will allow the university to coerce up to a quarter of the academics to allocate 70 percent or more of their workload to teaching—junking the traditional 40 percent allocation for research, writing and publication. The proposed EA also imposes a real wage cut.

Barnes and the NTEU are suppressing all information about vital opposing resolutions passed at a membership meeting on June 19. Moved by Socialist Equality Party supporters, the motions called for a unified national struggle by university workers to overturn all the budget cuts and for vastly increased education funding, at all levels, to guarantee the basic social right to free, first-class education for all students.

These resolutions, passed in the presence of Barnes, advanced a socialist perspective completely opposed to the pro-capitalist one of the NTEU. Her response, and that of the union leadership as a whole, has been to refuse to circulate the resolutions to Macquarie staff or their colleagues elsewhere.

This underscores the anti-democratic character of the

union, which flows necessarily from its collaboration with managements. It specialises in striking backroom deals, calling off industrial action for which members have voted, and then presenting its EAs as fait accomplis.

Gooding also personifies the NTEU’s trajectory. She was elevated by the outgoing leadership after her role in last year’s dispute at Perth’s Murdoch University. She was instrumental in pushing through an EA that gave the management virtually everything, including a real wage cut, it had sought when it originally moved to terminate its previous agreement with the NTEU.

In the face of the bitterness and disgust produced by the NTEU’s betrayals, pseudo-left organisations are seeking to peddle illusions that the union can be transformed in order to defend members’ interests. One of the USyd Union Action candidates, Alma Torlakovic, a supporter of the pseudo-left Socialist Alternative, declared in her election statement that “as an active socialist,” one of her “life goals” was “rebuilding unionism.”

Exactly the opposite is required in order to reverse the assault on university workers and students. Trade unions always were based on the perspective of seeking better terms and conditions for wage labour, not the overthrow of capitalism to establish socialism. In the past they could extract concessions from employers, but today they enforce the reversal of all the hard-won gains of the working class.

To fight for their basic rights, university employees need to decisively break from the NTEU, and begin to form workplace rank-and-file committees that are completely independent from the union, and from Labor and the Greens.

Such committees would turn out to workers everywhere for a struggle against the corporate offensive and the drive toward authoritarianism and war. This requires a socialist perspective, aimed at totally reorganising society in the interests of the vast majority, not the profits of the wealthy few. All those who want to take forward this fight should contact the Committee For Public Education (CFPE), established by the Socialist Equality Party.



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